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CIRCUS FIRE - Synopsis

Hungry for a diversion from the events of WW2, the people of Hartford, Connecticut escape a scorching summer afternoon to lose themselves in the magic and excitement of "The Greatest Show on Earth." When unexpected disaster strikes and six-thousand circus-goers race to evacuate the flaming big-top, the death defying feats, animal instincts, and heroic acts normally reserved for the centre ring erupt in the panic-stricken audience.

Historical Background

This play is inspired by a true story.

On a scorching-hot day in July, 1944, the traveling Big Top of the Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus burned to the ground in Hartford Connecticut, while over 8,000 audience members were watching a matinee inside. Although the cause of the fire was never determined, during an aerial act by the Flying Wallendas, witnesses saw a small flame near the ground, which climbed the sidewall of the tent to the roof of the big top. To alert circus personnel to the problem, the band struck up the circus disaster signal, "The Stars and Stripes Forever," which they continued to play until their platform collapsed.

The day before, the circus had "blown" a show arriving late from Providence, considered by the circus workers to be the ultimate unlucky omen.

The Big Top had been waterproofed with a mixture of paraffin and gasoline, and in about six minutes it evaporated in a wave of fire, collapsing the tent poles. One hundred and sixty-eight people, many of them children, were killed, and hundreds more were severely burned or injured jumping from the grandstand or being trampled in an effort to escape.

A child killed in the fire, nicknamed "Little Miss 1565" (the ID number assigned to her at the morgue) was never claimed or identified. Stuart O'Nan's 2000 book, *The Circus Fire*, provides an excellent account of the disaster and its aftermath.

Production History

Circus Fire was originally developed by Intrepid Theatre in Victoria, with the support of the BC Arts Council and Intermunicipal Arts Commission. It was presented as part of the 2001 Victoria Fringe Festival. Playwright Janet Munsil and Director Britt Small continued their collaboration on this piece at the University of Victoria in 2003, where a new version of *Circus Fire* was produced as part of the Phoenix Theatre's FIND Festival.

CHARACTERS

THE AUDIENCE

The Little Girl – six years old
The Soldier
The Mother
Her son, Donald – eight years old

The four main characters who make up the audience take on additional circus roles, such as the tent crew, vendors, animals, clowns, ringmaster, aerialists, firemen, etc.

MUSIC

Most of the action is underscored with music. The original music in this production was composed by Avery Brown.

COSTUME

Actors wear the costume of their Audience character throughout.

PROPS

Almost all of the props are mimed. The **practical props appear in bold**, and are very basic – transforming from one item to another: A fire bucket, a rope, an American flag on a pole, a crutch, a hoop, broom, a whistle. Strips of silk signifying the “canvas” tent sidewalls are practical, and will be raised and lowered over the audience during the performance.

NOTES

Transitions between characters are seamless, visible to the audience, and do not involve costume changes, apart from red noses/hats for the clowns. The action between scenes is continuous and overlaps where possible.

Most of the stage floor is a raised, circular platform – the tent, the ring. The actors playing The Audience take seats in the actual house, where they can be picked out by spotlight.

SETTING

July 1944, Hartford Connecticut. The action begins and ends in an empty field

THE TRAIN

The stage is empty as the lights go down. Before dawn.
Sound of Crickets. A spotlight glows on the back wall, the moon.

The sound of a train in the distance, approaching.

The moon slowly sinks, moving down the back wall and across the floor until it reaches the circle platform. Revealed: The Little Girl, crouched in a fetal position, listens to the rumble of the train with her ear to the ground.

The train sound grows louder until it is deafening, and a large poster blows across the stage floor like a tumbleweed, coming to rest on the platform near the girl.

Sound of the train continuing past and hissing to a stop in the distance.

The Little Girl gets up and, slinging her red and white kerchief “hobo sack” over her shoulder, walks over to examine the poster, followed by the spotlight. She drops the sack smooths the poster out on the ground. A large, crumpled Circus Poster for the “Greatest Show on Earth,” circa 1940s.

She sits on the floor and unties her sack, removing a favourite toy, a box of animal crackers and a precious dime, which she holds up to admire.

Using the stick and kerchief from her sack, she creates a tiny circus tent. Using the cookie box as the animal car of the train, she “parks” it outside her tent.

The Little Girl empties the cookie box out and sorts the animals, “animating” some as they enter the tent, and eating others.

LITTLE GIRL: (as Ringmaster) Ladies and Gentlemon, boys and girls, children of all ages, WELCOME to the Greatest Show on Earth!

Music: a wind suddenly comes up and the poster blows away.

The Little Girl is startled, and tries to catch the poster as it disappears into the darkness. Sensing that someone is coming, she gathers up her things and hides, ducking under the edge of the platform.

RIGGING THE TENT

The Canvas Boss revealed upstage, holding a **rope**.
He surveys the site, empty and expansive, deciding where the tent will go.
He waves to the crew behind him to bring in the canvas.

The Little Girl looks on, sinks down.

As the Canvas Boss walks towards the centre of the platform, he pulls on the rope.
Entering behind him on the other end of the rope, a 2-actor elephant (The Mother & Donald,) dragging in the King Pole.

When the elephant arrives at centre there is a pause. The Canvas Boss pats the elephant's trunk. Looks over to where the Little Girl was, but she's vanished.

Canvas Boss whistles loudly to signal the crew.

Music change.

The elephant "breaks apart" into the crew of roustabouts (Little Girl now plays crew)

They carry in a large roll of fabric, folded and rolled like a fire hose. The **canvas** is unrolled and rigged, raised, and staked. It's already hot outside.

Activity / Vocalization: exertion, lifting, heaving, sledge-hammering.

Canvas Boss begins chant out of these sounds, others join in and move around the perimeter of the circle until it has been "staked" around the entire edge.

ALL: Heave it, weave it, shake it, take it, make it, break it, move along. ***(REPEAT)***

When the job is done, they step back in silence to admire their work and acknowledge the tent, wiping their brows and exhaling in unison.

They dust off their hands and break away offstage to next job. One stays behind, transforms back into astonished Little Girl.

BEHIND THE SCENES

As the Little Girl looks up in wonder at the huge tent, a animal handler enters with a **broom** and **bucket**.

The Little Girl grabs her box of animal crackers and hides behind a huge "invisible" object on the platform. She peeks around it to watch the handler nearby.

The handler reaches up affectionately to stroke the trunk of the invisible elephant, chatting with it about the heat, then begins to scrub the elephant with the broom, delineating the size and shape of the animal in the space.

The Little Girl tries to remain unseen, inching around the elephant as the handler works his way around. When the Little Girl backs up towards the head of the elephant, she jumps and squeals as the elephant tries to nab her box of animal crackers.

Then handler marches around and catches the girl. Angry at first, he warms to her and invites her to feed one of her cookies to the elephant.

The Little Girl holds up a cookie and squeals as the elephant takes it in its trunk, then sniffs her hand. The handler gives the elephant a drink out of the bucket.

The Handler hears other workers coming.

Handler: Hey kid, better skiddaddle.

The Handler exits very slowly with the broom, leading the elephant.

The Little Girl hides as two Coke concession workers enter. They are unloading crates of coke “bucket brigade” fashion.

COKE GUY: Ain’t 8 o’clock and it’s already a scorcher.
Second Man: You got that right. Them’s the last of it.

Picking up the last two crates, one of the men sees the Little Girl.

Second Man: Hey pal, get a load of the lot lice.
COKE GUY: Hey you, kid! We ain’t open! Scram!
Second Man: You heard him! Scram!

The Little Girl runs off. The men laugh and stack the last crates.

Second Man: That’s it. Watch yer bottles don’t melt in the sun, there.
COKE GUY: Har, har.

The Coke Guy opens a couple of cokes and they both drink, second man exits
Coke Guy begins setting up his concession. The Little Girl sneaks back in, irresistibly drawn to the thought of a cold soda.

A Bally Girl (showgirl) enters, fanning herself and smoking.

BALLY GIRL: Jesus, I’m already sweating like a pig. Gimme a coke and a dog, sugar.
COKE GUY: Dogs ain’t done yet.
BALLY GIRL: We got nine thousand for the matinee. Gonna be hotter’n hell in there.

The bally girl is stretching, warming up. The Coke Guy opens a coke for her and puts it on the counter. As the Bally Girl bends over, the Coke Guy leans across the counter to get a better look at her behind.

While he’s not looking, the Little Girl sneaks the open coke and gulps it down. As she does, she watches another man (Clown) enter with a **bucket**. He finds a quiet corner and turns the bucket over to use as a stool. He sits and adjusts a “mirror” as he prepares to make up.

The Bally Girl catches the Coke Guy looking at her.

BALLY GIRL: Whadda you looking at?
COKE GUY: Nothin, nothin.
BALLY GIRL: Where’s that coke?
COKE GUY: Put it right there.
BALLY GIRL: I don’t thinks so, honey.
COKE GUY: (he sees it’s gone) Well, where is it then?
BALLY GIRL: Beats me.
COKE GUY: I put it right there.
BALLY GIRL: Big ape.

Bally Girl picks up a bottle from a crate and opens it with her teeth, exits, drinking.
Circus Fire Copyright ©Janet Munsil 2003

COKE GUY: Hey. Hey! Whadid you call me? Hey! Come back here! You gotta pay for that...

Coke Guy transforms into Gargantua, big bad-tempered ape, pacing in his cage, looking miserable, occasionally hollering and beating his chest for attention.

The little girl watches the Clown put on his make-up and his nose from a distance, sneaking closer. He's a character/hobo clown.

A second clown enters, carrying a squealing baby pig (actor provides sound).

Clown 2: Hey. Hot enough for ya?

Clown 1: You said it.

Clown 2: Got time to go over the bit?

Clown 1: Sure.

They work a minute part of the clown fire brigade act seen later a couple of times. The second clown notices the girl watching.

Clown 2: You got company. Shoo, sweetheart, go find your mommy.

The first clown looks at her, then waves her over. He does a little silent shtick for her benefit. The second clown lets her pet the piglet, which squeals, and the second clown exits. She laughs. The first clown puts a dot of red makeup on the end of her nose. He holds up the mirror so she can see. He makes a sad face in the mirror behind her and she imitates him, giggling at first, then serious.

The Bally Girl returns, marches past the cage where Gargantua sits. She gives Gargantua the finger, and he beats his chest and hollers.

Bally Girl: Yeah, what are you lookin at you big ugly ape? You reek!

Gargantua walks away. Bally Girl speaks to Clown, on her way out

Bally Girl: Got a bad feelin' about this show, hon. We blew that matinee yesterday, s'bad luck. (she crosses herself, spits, and exits)

The Clown starts to pack up as the Little Girl looks on, sadly. She waves "bye." He salutes her. She salutes back. The Clown marches off, beating the bucket like a drum. The girl stands alone.

TICKETS

Ticket Vendor opens the window of his booth for business.

Ticket Vendor: I'll take the next person over here.

A man approaches the ticket booth, holding a small crying child by the hand.

Man: You don't want to go.

Child: NO!

Man: You don't want to go to the circus?

Child: NO!

Man: OK, Then we won't go.

Man picks up child and carries it away hastily. Child screams - now it wants to go.

Ticket Vendor: I'll take the next person over here! Yessir, Servicemen in uniform get in free, right over there. Yep, it's a scorcher – now you enjoy the show, on us! Thank you, sir. Next? Next?

The little girl runs up to get a ticket. She holds up her dime.

Ticket Vendor: Hey, I didn't see you down there. What you got there, little girl? A dime? That ain't enough, sweetheart. Costs one dollar and twenty cents to buy a ticket. Go find your ma, she'll give you the rest of the money.

Donald and his Mother enter. Donald is leaping around, shooting circus-goers with an imaginary gun.

Donald: Ack ack ackackack! Got em, Joe! Ack Ack Ack!

Mother: Donald, that's enough. That's enough. Donald. Donald. Stop. Stop. Your shoelace is broken. Stop. Stop. Wait. Wait.

Donald stops for a moment as his mother ties his lace and tucks it into his shoe.

Mother: There.

Donald: Ack ack ack ack ack! Pilot to bombardier! Pilot to bombardier! Got holes in the wing, we're running low on fuel, we might have to ditch! Ack ackackackack! Anti-aircraft at four o'clock. (he makes sound of bomb falling and exploding.) Direct hit!

Mother continues to drag Donald forward in the ticket line, a step at a time. He slows and begins to drag, twisting his legs.

Mother: What now?

Donald: I gotta go.

Mother: Donald, I told you to go before we left.

Donald: I did!

Mother: young man, if we have to get out of this line we are not getting back in.

Donald: But it's my birthdaaaaaaay!

The Little Girl is still pleading with the Ticket Vendor. She looks to Donald's Mother for help.

Ticket Vendor: Come on folks, let's keep it moving. Next? Next!

The Little Girl slips in behind Donald and Mother.

Ticket Vendor: This one yours?

Mother: Nope. Sorry, honey. You lost or something?

Ticket Vendor: Come on little girl, step aside, you're holding up the line.

The Little Girl steps aside, dejected. She walks to the edge of the stage and sits with her chin in her hand, looking at her dime.

Mother counts out the money carefully, already exhausted.

Donald: Tell him it's my birthday! Tell him Daddy's in the war! He's a tail-gunner! Ack ack ack ack ack!

Ticket Vendor: Happy birthday. That'll be two sixty-five. Closing up here folks, next window!

SNEAKING IN

A 'tough' kid, emulating James Cagney, swaggers in, looking over his shoulder. He loiters near a section of the tent **sidewall**.

First Kid: Psst. Come on. S'clear. Come on.

A second kid, clearly also a Cagney fan, enters. He looks over his shoulder.

Second Kid: (to offstage) Go home! Go home! I said go home! Go home!

A slow moving, panting hounddog follows the second kid. The dog goes over to the little girl and sniffs the back of her head. She giggles and pets the dog.

Second Kid: I said go home!

First Kid: Okay, on a counta "three," listen, when I say, "three", got it?

Second kid nods.

First Kid: Okay. Ready? One...

Second Kid:(to dog) Stay. Okay?

First Kid: Two

Second Kid: Stay!

First Kid: Three! Go! Go!

The First Kid lifts the tent sidewall and the Second Kid sneaks under. The Little Girl sees this and rushes over, begging to be let in. The First Kid says no as she begs, then holds out his hand for graft. The Little Girl hesitates, then hands him her dime. He makes sure no one is watching.

First Kid: Okay, on a count of three, get it? One, two....

He lifts the sidewall, and the Little Girl ducks in. The first kid makes sure the coast is clear. As he turns to the tent, a security guy enters.

First Kid: One, two...

Security Guy: Hey! Kid! Get away from the tent!

First kid takes off, screaming, past the panting dog.

First Kid: Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Security Guy (exiting): Heh heh, did you get the look on that kid's face?

Heh, heh, heh.

The dog looks on. It's very hot. The dog sits, panting and thinking about water. Nothing happens. The dog lies down with its head on its paws, panting. The dog lies on its side.

Offstage Voice: Hot Dogs! Get your pipin' Red-hots here!

The dog looks up. Sniffs. Wanders offstage in the direction of the voice.

INSIDE THE TENT

Lights dim. Inside the tent. The Ringmaster enters the empty tent with an American flag and places it USC. He looks up into the lights. As he calls them, brightly coloured "theatrical" lights come up.

Ringmaster: And go. And go. And Go. Go. Go. Good.

The Ringmaster gives 'thumbs up' to the lighting guy above, then crosses himself and spits.

Ringmaster: Protect us. (he blows a whistle) DOORS! DOORS!

The ringmaster makes a final adjustment to the flag, then sweeps a section of the sidewall aside for the audience to enter.

TAKING THEIR SEATS

Mother and Donald hand their tickets to an unseen usher and enter the tent, registering the size/grandeur of the structure. Donald is awestruck and uncharacteristically quiet. Mother drags him along. They walk along the edge of the stage, looking for their seats, Mother checking the tickets.

A clown, wearing a fire helmet, enters with two fire buckets, and begins to lecture the audience on fire hazards, exits, and safety procedures, scolding people for having legs in the aisle, bags on the floor etc.

Mother and Donald approach an aisle and Mother looks up to the top, looking worried. She's afraid of heights. The Fire-chief Clown, imitating Donald, comes over. The clown begins to scold them for blocking the aisle.

Donald: Aaaaah!

He hides behind his mother and tries to drag her away.

Mother: Donald, it's just a clown.

Donald: Make it go away!

Mother: It just wants to say hi. Donald. Donald! Stop that. It's his birthday.

The clown shrugs and moves off, placing the fire buckets on the way out.

Donald and Mother begin the steep climb to their seats. Mother hears her name called. She catches sight of a neighbor a distance away and waves back. Cupping her ears to hear, she answers, shouting back:

Mother: It's his birthday – I got a day off from the plant. Yes, he is excited. What? (she listens. Response maybe accompanied by some "sign language")

Just got a letter from him. He always takes Donald to the circus on his birthday, it's the first time he's been away. (Listens)

Donald jumps up and down, waving his arms wildly to catch the attention of a friend far away in the back row.

Donald: Eddie! Eddie! Eddie! Eddie! Eddie!

Mother: (to her friend) Soon I hope. Finish the job and get them home soon, that's what I say. I didn't know the seats would be so high up – I'm not so good with heights. You have a seat next to you?

Donald is jumping up and down, tugging on her sleeve.

Mother: What, Donald?

Donald: I want to go sit up at the top with Eddie!

Mother: You go up, I'm going to sit down here in front with Mrs Jones.

Donald: Yipee! Ma, it's hot, can I take my shirt off?

Mother: No.

Donald; Awwwww!

Mother goes to sit with her friend in the front row. Donald heads up to the top row, taking the longest possible route and squeezing past seated people in his row, talking to each one.

***Donald: Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me.
Excuse me. It's my birthday. Excuse me. Excuse me.***

At the entrance, a wounded soldier, using a crutch, enters. He has a seat in front, with an empty seat next to him. He is new to the crutch, finds it cumbersome, and has trouble finding a place to put it once he's seated. It falls to the ground.

The Little Girl pops up "from under the bleachers," near the soldier, and hands him his crutch. She looks at his injured leg, puzzled and concerned.

The soldier thanks her, but is embarrassed. She smiles at him, and touches her nose, making her clown face. The lights begin to dim. The Little Girl slips an empty seat, next to the soldier.

Donald yells down to his Mother.

***Donald: Ma? Ma! When's it gonna start?
Mother: Soon.
Donald: But when is it supposed to start?
Mother: In a few minutes, Donald. Now settle down.
Donald: Ma – I have to go.
Mother: You just went.
Donald: I have to go again!
Mother: It's going to start, you'll miss it.
Donald: (whines)
Mother: Come on then. Hurry up.***

The lights begin go down, with two brief drumrolls

Lighting: Spotlight on the flag.

Music: The Star Spangled Banner, instrumental.